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ABSTRACT

This booklet presents specific suggestions, based on research, to help parents encourage their children to become readers. Suggestions for reading to children include: (1) continuing to read to children once they learn to read; (2) reading to children regularly; (3) talking about what is read; (4) sharing reading; (5) starting slowly; and (6) selecting books wisely. Other suggestions to parents for encouraging children to read include making sure children have books of their own, talking with and listening to children, giving children the opportunity to write, adult modeling of reading, using television wisely, using the library, and becoming involved at school. (RS)

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Helping Your Child Become a Reader

It is sometimes said that being a parent is the only job we can get with no experience, and that just about the time we get the hang of it, we are out of work. Despite our initial insecurities with the job, there are some decided advantages all parents share.

First, we have good instincts. By trusting those instincts, we guided our children through the monumental amount of learning they accomplished in the first five years of their lives. With our nearly intuitive support, they learned to talk and to interact with their new world.

Second, we know that raising children takes more time than any one of us has to give, and yet we continue to try to find ever more time for our kids.

Third, parents appreciate children—their freshness, their language, their perspectives, and their accomplishments.

These three secret weapons—trusting instincts, taking time, and appreciating children—are the strengths we as parents rely on when we launch our children into new experiences such as entering elementary school and beginning to learn to read and write. Trust, time, and appreciation underlie all of the suggestions for supporting children's literacy learning that appear in this booklet.

Parents share something further. We want what is best for our children. We want them to achieve their dreams. Sometimes, however, our goals conflict with our children's goals. We want our children to be happy, healthy, and self-

assured, but at times they seem to prefer starting quarrels, swallowing junk food, and testing our love.

To confuse matters further, even our own goals seem at times to conflict with one another. For example, we want our children to do well in school, but we don't want them to experience undue pressure or stress. We want others (especially teachers) to accept and like them, but we don't want them to lose their sense of self. We want them to be responsible for their actions, but we realize that they are children, too. When our children begin elementary school, these conflicts come into sharp focus.

Launching a child into school can be a real lump-in-the-throat experience. It's the first time others will make independent judgments about our child, and those judgments seem powerful and far reaching. We want those "significant others" to see our children as we do—as full of promise. We want others to understand them and appreciate their differences. We are uncertain whether the background we have provided meets the expectations of our children's schools. Did we do too much or too little? Will the pace at school be too fast or too slow for them?

But of this we can be certain: All children in the United States spend most of their hours in the primary grades learning to read and write better and better. By the time they finish third grade, they will have read many books and parts of books for pleasure and for information. They will be able to write their ideas and communicate with others in writing.

No matter how rapidly or how slowly they learn in the primary grades, they need our encouragement. Here are some specific suggestions, based on research, for shaping that encouragement.

Read to Your Child

This suggestion is found everywhere: in family magazines, on television, and posted in the pediatrician's office. It is hard to imagine that simply reading aloud to children has so many benefits both in children's school success and in the ease with which they learn to read. But it does.

Repeatedly, researchers tracing the experiences of successful readers find that someone has read to them regularly. One author entitled her work "Reading Aloud – When the Pleasurable Is Measurable." This means that read-aloud sessions, already full of intangible rewards such as intimacy, comfort, and imagination at play, also result in reading growth. There are some simple guidelines to remember.

- Don't stop reading to children when they learn to read. Many parents are committed to storytime for young children. Yet, as children enter school and begin to learn to read for themselves, their family storytime diminishes and then stops. We need to continue reading aloud to our school age children. By listening to you read aloud from stories and text that still may be too hard for them to read, your young reader learns how more complex stories take shape, how authors use words, and how fluent adult reading sounds.

  The language of literature comes alive when it rolls off the tongue of a best loved grown-up. When nonfiction is read, children's ears and heads take in what they could not yet learn by reading themselves. When you read longer, chapter books, children hear the works of authors they will read for themselves someday. Their interest in books is piqued, and they come to value reading as a worthwhile, fulfilling act. All of this makes for "wanting to read," a large part of the learning to read process.

- Read regularly. In today's busy families, reading aloud needs to be a scheduled priority. Some families find the

ideal time to be just before bedtime. Since most children enjoy listening to many types of stories, families with children at different stages and ages often can read to all the children at once. When stories are complex, younger children can catch the drift and ask parents for clarification. When the stories are familiar or easy, older children listen smugly to tales they know well enough to read for themselves.

- Talk about what you read. As experts have studied family storytime, they have discovered that not only is the read-aloud time important, but also that children's language and thinking develop when there is a chance to talk about the stories that are read. Parents don't have to plan the talk; once again, they need only follow their instincts.

  Some parents think out loud about a story they are reading. They speculate: "I bet I know what they're going to do." They question: "Now wait a minute. How could that happen?" They point out: "Look how many trolls fit on this page!" And they answer children's questions. They play the role of an "out loud" responder to stories, breaking into the flow when they have something they really want to say, because when parents talk about stories, so do their children.

  What does this story talk mean for your young readers? It means that their vocabularies grow. It means that they learn to link stories with their own life experiences. It means that they learn they can use what they know about the world to make sense of stories. As they work out the meanings of stories with adults, children learn to command their own comprehension. They participate, reflect, and recall, all of which contribute to school success.

- Let your young reader read to you. Some primary grade children who are learning to read act just as they do when they are learning to stack blocks, climb stairs, or balance a two wheeler. They dive into books eagerly, reading and rereading, practicing and practicing. These

Helping children select books at a bookstore or library shows them how much importance you attach to their reading.

kids often want your attention and your praise for their new skill. So listen to them, even if you are listening with one ear while you bathe the baby, drive the car, or do the dishes. Try to comment on the story if you can. If you can't understand the story because the reading is too labored or too error ridden, you can try saying, "Wow! Listen to you read."

To encourage your children and help them grow as readers, listen more closely for the story's meaning than for errors. Reading errors are the natural by-product of getting better. By correcting your child too often, you risk dampening the "want to read" spirit in the budding reader. So provide help when the child needs it and watch for the errors to fade away as your child reads more.

When children begin to read well enough for you to follow the content of what they are reading, the highest

praise you can give is to respond to the story content like a good listener. For example: "I was so glad that the Cat in the Hat cleaned the whole house before the mother got home. What a relief!"

Laugh at the funny parts. Follow your instincts to respond like a reader. If you're thinking a response, say it. For example, make a comment: "Oh dear, now that worries me." Or ask a question: "How do you think the illustrator made the sky look like morning?" It helps your child see that grown-ups think about what they read.

- Share reading. Children who want to read to you will enjoy playing "I read; you read." This simply means that you take turns reading. In the beginning, you may read a sentence aloud, and then your child reads it. Or you may read a sentence up to the last word and stop. Your child supplies that word. You can reverse roles so that your child reads and stops, and you must be ready to take over.

  Sometimes, children like to take turns with you reading every other page or every other paragraph. It makes pages and stories shorter for them, and it sounds like "real" reading. Besides that, it's fail proof, because you can choose the turn taking technique based on the difficulty of the book. The more difficult the book, the more you read until they take over. The easier the book, the bigger the chunks they read, and the smaller the chunks you read. Best of all is taking parts in the books so that you "play act" the story: "I'll be Grandfather; you can be Bobby."

- Start slowly. Some children are reluctant to display their newly developing reading skills. They need more encouragement, and they need to see valid purposes for reading. You may need to start slowly. For example, ask them to read to you when you know they can't miss. While you are baking, you may say, "Look on the box and tell me how many eggs I need." When you are shopping, say, "I need a 16 ounce box of Raisin Bran. Can

you help me find it." When you are driving, ask for help in locating the street, bank, or shop you are traveling to. Just as you use everyday print, help your children use it successfully: "Let's read the comics. Look in this box on the front of the newspaper and see on what page they begin."

- Select books wisely. When you select books to share with your children, you might want to choose ones they will be able to read almost instantly. Select books that contain familiar songs or rhymes (such as "London Bridge" or "I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly"); or books with pictures that "give away" the text (such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *Little Gorilla*); or rhyme and riddle books that, once mastered, create a demand for more. Read the book aloud first and watch how quickly your children take over the reading.

  You also can ask your child's teacher or a librarian for book suggestions. Don't be concerned that children are only memorizing when they read and reread predictable books. Like stacking blocks and balancing a two wheeler, self-assigned practice is often how reading gets started. Neither should you be concerned about the lack of much print in predictable books. That sometimes makes the book look more inviting and manageable for young readers. They will take risks with harder material when they feel comfortable.

When children have a special interest in a subject, they often will take risks with harder books.

Make Sure Children Have Books of Their Own

Researchers have documented that in families with children who have been successful in learning to read and who enjoy reading, each child owns some books and has a place to keep them. The books don't have to be fancy or new, and the place to keep them could be a cardboard carton. It doesn't matter. Book ownership characterizes the more successful reader.

At gift giving time, think of a book as a "gift that keeps on giving." Other "tools" of literacy children can use include magazines (such as *Cricket*, *Highlights for Children*, and *Ranger Rick*), chalk and chalkboards, waterproof markers, flattened brown paper grocery bags, castoff typewriters, blank sheets of paper stapled together, and magic slates. Tapes of stories can boost a child's fluency and love for hearing a story repeatedly. Soon, books become linked to reading and writing, as well as to giving and getting.

Talk with and Listen to Your Primary Grade Child

A recently published and widely circulated book for educators is *Lessons from a Child* (Calkins, 1983). The title reminds us of how much we have to learn from the "lessons children teach" and how capable children are of teaching us. For instance, a kindergartner named Andrew announced to his teacher, "I'm interested in bridges, and if you are, too, tomorrow I'll bring a book." Not every child announces interests as clearly as Andrew. But all children display their interests through their play, their conversations, and their questions.

All parents know that children sometimes ask powerful, important questions at precisely the wrong time. Yet, we help them grow by encouraging their interests and making their question asking risk free. Learning about the world should feel safe and comfortable. Learning to read and write are just two more kinds of learning about which your child needs to feel secure.

One effective way to lead children to reading is to show them that the answers to some of their questions can be found in books. You need not drop everything and rush for a reference book when your youngster asks how clouds stick to the sky. But neither should you just say, "I don't know. Go ask your mother." Listen and watch for real interests. Remember the important questions if you can't answer them right away, and respond later. Tell the children you aren't sure (when you aren't), tell them you know how to find out, and then show them how you find out.

Some families play a "talk about" game in which family members take turns selecting a conversational topic at mealtime. The one who chooses the topic can tell about or ask about it. Other family members add what they know and tell what they're wondering about the topic. For example, if seven year old Cara chooses robots to talk about, she can both tell what she knows and ask questions about robots. In some families, it's permissible to leave the table to

look up an answer. In others, the family helps the leader remember the questions for later.

By listening to and observing your children, by providing them with experiences to talk about and then encouraging that talk, you can learn their interests and learn lessons about ways to lead them to read.

Give Children Opportunities to Write

A five and a half year old named Paul Bissex once left a sign on his bedroom door that read: DO NAT DSTRUB: GNYS AT WRK. His mother read that sign, and rather than interpreting it as four spelling errors, she saw instead how much her "genius" knew about written language (Bissex, 1980). For just as children who are learning to talk invent new words and use language in unique ways, so do they invent spellings en route to writing conventionally.

Just as acceptance of the intended meanings of children's oral language is critical to their feeling secure when talking, so does acceptance of their writing and reading encourage them to continue their efforts in those areas. Researchers who have studied children's miscues and misspellings indicate that growth often takes place in predictable (if not always smooth) ways, and many errors drop out with practice and experience.

Parents who wish to help their children grow in the ability to write stay alert for ways to provide real reasons to write. Children who write letters to relatives, make lists, label their drawings, or keep a journal are writing for a variety of real reasons.

Your child's teacher also will be trying to nourish writing by responding to the messages your child is creating. At the same time, the teacher will watch closely for the signals writing provides that your child is gaining skill in matching the sounds of language with its written symbols, an important part of learning to read.

Children should have access to books they can read with ease and pleasure.

Model Reading

Adults who consider themselves lifelong readers often point out the influence of a parent or other adult who served as a model of someone who valued reading. So even with your feet up as you read your newspaper or novel, you are still in the act of encouraging your child to read. A quiet time in the evening when everyone reads or looks at books gives children the important message that grown-ups value and take pleasure in reading.

Listen to children read, and encourage the pride they feel in their accomplishment.

Use Television Wisely

Children tend to read more when they watch television less. Some experts recommend that children watch no more than ten hours of television each week. But television can be a tremendous tool for education, too. The broad range of science and nature programs available, as well as dramatizations of children's literature, gives children experiences that can stimulate their interests and encourage them to read. The keys seem to be setting limits, making wise selections, and taking time to watch together and discuss what you view.

Use the Library

Regular use of the library ensures that it's a familiar, comfortable place for your young reader. Children will soon want to select books on their own. Some choose oversized books with giant pictures and tiny print that can become frustrating if the young reader takes on the book page by page. Nevertheless, certain books can be selected just for looking (the "look book" of the week). Other beginning readers like to select a book without pictures—one that just fills the small hand and has the feel of a book a real reader reads.

Parents often want to make certain that children also select some books that they can read by themselves. Librarians can point out the sections that match children's varying interests, ages, and ability levels. Other sources for book selection are listed at the end of this booklet.

Different checkout systems seem to work best for different families. One mother of successful readers reported that her family always checked out ten books each week so that they could remember exactly how many were due back. Other families report more irregular library use, relying on the library for special times and special projects.

The guidelines, then, are these: When you visit the library with your primary aged readers, select one read-aloud book that relates to what the child is studying at school. In addition, let children choose and check out a book they want to read, even if it is too hard for them. There is nothing wrong with "just looking" at books (and reading a bit). In fact, the book that is too hard now holds promise for what children will be able to read when they can read better.

Then, relying on your instincts, what you know about your children's interests, and a librarian, take home some books that the young reader will read with ease and pleasure. If you're unsure about the "ease," read the books aloud to the children first. Finally, take home some children's books that delight *you* and that you will enjoy reading aloud to your children.

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Be Involved at School

Back-to-School Nights and Open Houses can present more discomforts than just the small chairs. Those times are designed to convey general information to a large audience, so information comes rapidly, and too often specific questions can't be addressed.

Make an appointment and go back during parent-teacher conference time. Tell the teacher what you think is most important to know about your child. Then ask some specific questions and really listen to the answers. Ask how the teacher thinks you can best encourage your child's reading and what the teacher sees as your child's greatest strengths. You may want to know what the teacher's hopes and expectations are for your child and how the teacher is working to achieve those goals.

You may also want to know what is expected in your child's responses to homework assignments, how frequently homework is assigned, and how the reading program is organized. Your conversation should focus in a positive manner on attributes, strengths, and actions—of children, parents, and teachers.

Knowing the curriculum helps, too. Some families love to learn along with their school children—about insects, tall tales, animal habitats, or whatever children are studying. By keeping in touch with the school and teacher throughout the year, you will know what's being taught, what's being explored, what's expected, what your child is learning, and how you can help.

Take Heart and Be Confident

You can encourage your children's reading and writing growth by following the same path that led your children to be successful with learning to talk: Trust your instincts, take the time, and appreciate your children's efforts.

Recommended Reading for Parents

Books

Becoming a Nation of Readers: What Parents Can Do. Marilyn Binkley. D.C. Heath in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, 1988.

Family Storybook Reading. Denny Taylor and Dorothy S. Strickland. Heinemann Educational Books, 1986.

For Reading Out Loud! A Guide to Sharing Books with Children. Margaret M. Kimmel and Elizabeth Segal. Dell, 1984.

GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns to Write and Read. Glenda L. Bissex. Harvard University Press, 1980.

The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast and Too Soon. David Elkind. Addison-Wesley, 1981.

Leading to Reading: New Ways You Can Make Reading Fun for Children. Barbara L. Lee and Masha K. Rudman. Berkley Books, 1983.

Lessons from a Child. Lucy M. Calkins. Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.

Make Your Child a Lifelong Reader: A Parent-Guided Program for Children of All Ages Who Can't, Won't, or Haven't Yet Started to Read. Jacquelyn Gross and Leonard Gross. Jeremy Tarcher, 1986.

Parents and Teachers Together. Peter Smith. Macmillan, 1987.

A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading, fifth edition. Nancy Larrick. Westminster, 1983.

Talk with Your Child: How to Develop Reading and Language Skills through Conversation at Home. Harvey S. Winer. Viking Penguin, 1989.

Tell Me Another: Storytelling and Reading Aloud at Home, at School, and in the Community. Bob Barton. Pembroke Publishing, 1986.

Resources for Parents from IRA

Books

Comics to Classics: A Parent's Guide to Books for Teens and Preteens. Arthea (Charlie) Reed. No. 798. US$8.95; IRA members, US$7.95.

The Read-Aloud Handbook, revised edition. Jim Trelease. Published by Penguin Books and codistributed by IRA. No. 633. US$8.95; IRA members, US$8.25.

To order, send your check to: International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA. Please specify both title and publication number when ordering.

Parent Booklets

Helping Your Child Become a Reader. Nancy L. Roser. No. 161

How Can I Prepare My Young Child for Reading? Paula C. Grinnell. No. 163

You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read. Jamie Myers. No. 162

You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing. Marcia Baghban. No. 160

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Parent Brochures

IRA has available ten brochures covering a variety of topics pertaining to ways in which parents can help children of all ages become readers. To receive single copies of all ten brochures, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *three* ounces to Parent Brochures at the address above. The brochures are available in bulk quantities also, and ordering information appears in each brochure. (Requests from outside the USA should include a self-addressed envelope, but postage is not required.)

Children's Choices

Children's Choices is a yearly list of books that children identify as their favorites. To receive a single copy, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *four* ounces to Children's Choices at the address above.

About This Series

This booklet is part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help their children become readers. Many of the booklets are being copublished by IRA and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

ERIC/RCS Information Services

For more information on the development of reading and other language skills, write or call: ERIC/RCS, Smith Research Center, Suite 150, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408, USA. Telephone: (812) 855-5847.

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